



VOTF at the Crossroads: Where Are We Going?

**Remarks of Jim Post, President of Voice of the Faithful
National Leadership Convocation, Indianapolis, IN
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Good morning.

On behalf of Voice of the Faithful, I want to thank the City of Indianapolis for the hospitality and assistance that made this meeting possible. Indianans are rightly proud of their home state and their State Capital.

As we have worked with Ken Sauer, Mary Heins, and others from Indianapolis during the past months, we have appreciated their direct, problem-solving approach. They have tackled each issue head-on, and resolved most with a "can-do" spirit.

But the clearest expression of this "Indiana attitude" came from an unexpected source earlier this week.

As you may know, Carmel, Indiana, just north of Indianapolis, is the home of Dr. Paul Muller, who is the father of VOTF co-founder Dr. Jim Muller. He is the real "Dr. Muller" hereabouts. I recently wrote to Dr. Muller and invited him to join us for some portion of today's meeting. To our surprise, he called the office and said he wanted to speak to the "head honcho."

Now, "Head Honcho" is not a term generally used at Voice of the Faithful, so there was some confusion as to who Dr. Muller wanted to talk to. But after a time, the message got to me and we had a nice conversation. He claimed to be too old to party with us (he is in his 9th decade), but wished us well. He then offered me about 30 minutes worth of advice about what the "head honcho" should do at VOTF!

Dr. Muller's plain-spoken talk, and our colleagues' problem-solving spirit, should inspire what we do in the next 24 hours. We need candor and honest conversation. VOTF faces big challenges, as does our Church, and our purpose in being in Indianapolis is to roll up our sleeves and exhibit some of the Indiana spirit of determination to fix what's broken and address the biggest problems in our Church.

Looking Forward

The program says this is a talk about looking forward.

We don't apologize for the Catholic Church. We are the Church! We love it, and we want to change what ails it. The Catholic Church is filled with good people

who believe that faith is formed, and expressed, in action. They want to help others and create new ways to assist those in need. There may be fewer (because too many have left the Church in recent years), but those who remain do keep the faith, while trying to change the Church.

Church-bashing is easy sport these days, and I won't engage in it today. There is much legitimate criticism of the Church, however, because there is much that troubles decent Church-loving people. Closing churches and schools, declaring financial bankruptcy, and taking positions that trouble and divide Catholics with little or no attention to dialogue symbolize the problems.

In the face of these problems, however, Voice of the Faithful continues --each day-- to do something that moves us one more step toward reform.

This Convocation is bringing hundreds of VOTF leaders from around the country to Indiana, a state that has long been a crossroads of America, to develop the blueprint for the future.

We have been at a crossroads of sorts. We have undergone a lot of internal change this year, the kind that isn't very glamorous or interesting, but is vital to a longer term plan. And we do plan to be around for a long time to come! We have come a long way, but also know the journey is still very long.

Our job is to do something each day to move forward... to urge legislators to rescind statutes of limitations; to press diocesan lawyers and bishops to make public the records that tell the true story of how predators were protected. Sunlight is still the best disinfectant! We work to support the National Review Board & help to make it more effective; to make bishops hold one another accountable (or to be embarrassed for not doing so); and on and on.

The list of things that need to be done is long, the hours in each day too few, and our energy is always limited. But if each person does one thing each day, that is 365 actions in a year ... if we can get 10 people to do the same thing, that adds up to 3,650 acts of conscience that help move a world that did not want to know about sexual abuse.

We have more than 500 people in this hall today and that could be more than 182,500 actions – e-mails, telephone calls, letters, prayers, conversations-- to promote change and challenge the status quo.

It was Gandhi –a non-Catholic- who said, "Be the change you want to see in the world." Gandhi's message is the right message for Catholics to hear and to share. It is the message for us to live today, tomorrow, and every day.

This Convocation is a milestone in the history and evolution of Voice of the Faithful. This is also a crossroads meeting. Indiana has long been a crossroads in American history. And Indianapolis is the Capital City of this geographic crossroads.

What began three years ago as a protest against injustice to survivors of clergy sexual abuse and a massive administrative cover-up has evolved into a genuine movement for change within the Catholic Church. Today, we better understand the theology of this movement.

As Francine Cardman said this morning, "we are the Body of Christ." There is no body without the members, and we must work for change that enables the Body to use all the talents of all of its members.

This is a movement that insists on social justice, is rooted in faith, and has lots of practical ideas about steps that can be taken to reform an institution badly in need of change.

This movement has highlighted some of the worst things in the Roman Catholic Church ... but also some of the best. It has underscored the deep commitment that thousands of people have to live the Word of God in their deeds every day, to walk the talk of justice, and to bring abundant skills and talents to the tasks.

Where are we going?

"The past is prologue," said William Shakespeare. The challenges that lie before us must be understood in light of what VOTF has accomplished in the past three years.

Among the scholars with us today is Tony Pogorec of Catholic University who (with Bill D'Antonio) has studied VOTF as a social movement within the Catholic Church. Their new study will be unveiled in October when Boston College "Church in the 21st Century" program devotes an entire symposium to discussing the findings.

Also in our audience today is Tricia Meins, a doctoral candidate in the sociology of religion from the University of California, Santa Barbara. Tricia is one of a number of Ph.D. students whose doctoral research focuses on VOTF. These scholars are looking at VOTF from the perspectives of sociology, theology, and organizational science. Each will draw his or her own judgments, of course, but I think they will discover some truths about who we are.

We are mostly the Catholic sons and daughters of the Greatest Generation, and we are fast becoming the Vatican 2/baby boomers who have raised their children in the faith and now hope to see their grandchildren enter a church that can be trusted. That is why we have become a clear and reasoned voice for the Catholic laity.

We have also become a catalyst for change at the local level of parishes and dioceses. We want to help reform the Church even if some of its leaders do not want our help. We want to correct the wrongs, the injustices, and heal the Body of Christ. We believe –passionately—that accountability is necessary and that it must happen now!

The revised Charter and Norms for the Protection of Children and Young People that were approved by the USCCB just a few weeks ago have softened the language and standards, while reaffirming the bishops' authority. But watered down standards are not going to rebuild trust. The American public knows better. And the bishops seem not to recognize that in reaffirming their extensive authority they are reaffirming their responsibility for ensuring that justice is done to survivors and that no person is ever again sexually abused in the Catholic Church. The bishops need to walk their talk.

Of course, some do not see it that way. Cardinal Francis George of Chicago made an egregious error when he characterized critics of the USCCB revised Charter and Norms as “enemies of the Church.”

Cardinal George is terribly mistaken.

The laity is not the enemy!

The laity is not the problem.

In fact, women and men who are honest critics may be the best friends the Church has these days.

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That is the answer to “Where are we going?” We are going to keep working -keep struggling—to ensure that change comes to our Church and that healing and reconciliation take place. For there can be no return to being a Church of integrity if we do not first become of Church of honesty. There is no return to trust without accountability, for accountability is essential to the equation.

Three years ago, few among us imagined that VOTF would exist in 2005 or be the movement it has become. Today, our challenge is to chart the next three years. This Convocation, and the continuing work of the Council and all of us, will play vital roles in defining that future.

Congratulations and thank you for being here this weekend and for assuming responsibility to lead us into a new era for Voice of the Faithful.